

Report from the National Education Association Representative Assembly
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One of the things I find the most fascinating about attending the NEA RA is how much knowledge the delegates gain while there that the average member “back home” doesn’t have, or even realize they are missing. From the stories – good and bad – from other states to the vast array of caucuses to the awards, political action, and parliamentary procedure, there is a lot about the inner workings of our parent organization about which we have virtually no awareness at the ground level. One of those procedures which gained national attention in 2015, and again in 2016, was the endorsement process for the office of President of the United States, in the primary and general election, respectively. This was a contentious topic at the representative assembly this year, sparking much debate and multiple attempts to move the NEA to action on a different, more transparent process for future elections.

To speak openly for a moment prior to delving into the process by which NEA endorses candidates, permit me a moment of personal privilege. While the Christina Education Association openly publishes our by-laws and policy manual, which are the documents that direct how our organization works, many organizations do not, including the Delaware State Education Association and the NEA. While I understand the hesitation to reveal the “playbook”, so to speak, it is incumbent upon the leadership of an organization to ensure that members have awareness of the component parts of the governing documents of the organization. For instance, how would a member be aware of a “whistle blower policy” and follow it as needed if the member is never given free access to the document containing said policy? In the case of a re-election of officers, how might a member evaluate the incumbent’s performance of duties without having the expected duties in hand? For that matter, how might someone seeking election to a leadership position be expected to know what the responsibilities would be prior to making the commitment?

The NEA has published, through state leadership to RA delegates, the process involved with presidential candidate endorsements. In brief, the NEA PAC Council – the political action team – is given comparative information and data on the candidates, their policy views, a screening questionnaire by any candidate who completes one, and videotaped interviews with the NEA President. According to the information sent via email, “national, state, and local organization channels and resources are used to provide members with information related to the recommendation process, presidential candidates and issues, as well as to assess member attitudes and opinions”. Once this has occurred, the PAC Council may recommend endorsement of a primary candidate to the NEA Board of Directors, which group is comprised of individuals from each state elected within the state to represent the members, as well as various other key individuals from NEA committees. The endorsement recommendation must be approved by 58% of those voting. For a recommended endorsement of a general election presidential candidate, the PAC Council “may put before the RA delegates” the recommendation, which has also been approved by the Board of Directors, and said recommendation must be approved by 58% of those voting (if a yes/no option is given on the

ballot) or a simple majority of those voting (if the ballot indicates specific candidates to be selected).

Here is where the heart of the contention lies: Nationwide, many members, as evidenced by the national outcry and subsequent RA actions in 2016 and 2017, felt disenfranchised, left out of the process, and unheard by their parent organization(s). In 2016, the RA delegates voted to endorse the recommended presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, by a margin of about 85% to 15%. Keeping in mind that Clinton was already the endorsed primary candidate, about which many members felt strongly, Clinton was also the guest speaker on the day of the balloting for the endorsement recommendation. There was a demonstration against Clinton on the RA floor during her speech, and the convention center was packed with delegates, guests, and staff for the speech. In listening to debate at the 2017 RA around this topic, roughly half the delegates in attendance in 2017 felt that a lot of the 2015 (primary) and 2016 (general) endorsement process was straddling the gray area between unbiased and heavily managed. **Regardless of the facts, delegates felt disenfranchised, ignored, left in the dark, and deliberately sidetracked from participating in the process.**

As a result of the mixed feelings around the presidential candidate endorsement process (spurred largely by lack of knowledge, which I would argue is due directly to state and national leadership not informing the members, since the issued policy directly states that is how the information would be passed along; as a local leader I can say without hesitation the information was not issued by state or national leadership to the local, although as a GLBT Caucus member I did receive a survey from the caucus chair asking for my input), delegates introduced two new business items for consideration as well as a constitutional amendment, which will be considered, debated, and voted upon in 2018. Both of the new business items, numbers 22 and 159, sought to make the process more intentionally solicitous of the general membership at large, and both were referred to committee. The final text of each is as follows:

NEW BUSINESS ITEM 22: The 2017 RA directs the NEA PAC Council to make a plan for surveying the general membership regarding their preference for president of the United States on a quadrennial basis and to include the publication of the results using existing resources starting with the recommendation by the PAC Council for president of the United States in 2020.

NEW BUSINESS ITEM 159: NEA shall hold an advisory vote at the RA during regular voting for NEA officers to indicate member choices for preferred presidential candidates in presidential primaries. Ballots would list candidates from all parties and members would have the option of choosing one candidate or choosing one preferred candidate from each party. (During the RA 16 months previous to the upcoming presidential elections.)

The purpose of the constitutional amendment is described as, "To establish the Representative Assembly as the only body to recommend or endorse presidential candidates for both the primary and general election."

The clear theme here is that the members want more power and control over the endorsement process for presidential candidates. What was interesting about the debate was how close the actual votes were. On NBI 22, there was a nearly split vote, with several standing votes taken to assist the chair in determining the outcome. After that NBI failed, there was a request for a roll call vote, which would require the chair to seal off the convention hall and have each state delegation count up the individual votes of all delegates present *at the time of voting* to provide a delegate-by-delegate count of the actual votes cast. This request narrowly failed, as well, with some delegates feeling that the scheduled state voting times for officers and other balloted items removed entire states from the RA floor while this particular vote was taking place. Subsequent calls to reconsider the vote resulted in the NBI being referred to the PAC Committee as well as the introduction of NBI 159, which also was referred to the PAC Committee. This led to the introduction of the afore-mentioned constitutional amendment.

The key takeaway from all this, in my opinion, is that there is dissatisfaction among members related to the methodology for endorsing candidates for the nation's highest office. Keep in mind that the delegates to the NEA RA are elected by their state and local members at a ratio of 1 delegate for every 150 members. In Christina, we earned 8 delegates from the local level and had an additional CEA member in the state delegation. That's a total of 9 Christina folks voting on behalf of our 1200 or so members. Our votes should echo the votes of our membership, but without a process (such as what NBI 22 was calling for) there is no good way to ensure that all member voices are heard. With it being a vote of delegates, it is essential that leadership at all levels provide a clear process by which direct member voices are solicited and represented. Similar to the US electoral college, which members in theory are casting votes in accordance with the actual votes cast by the voters in their home districts and states, there should be an expectation that the RA delegates are casting votes that represent the members they were elected to represent.

If I were on the NEA leadership team, I would be taking a long, hard look at the communication methods and the process of getting information from top to bottom of the organization. Seeing the contention on the floor and reading about it virtually daily over the past two years, I would be assuring my members that yes, their concerns are being attended to with utmost concern. While ultimately the process itself might not change, it is clear that the breakdown of communication is inexcusable and must be addressed moving forward. The members cannot make informed decisions about leadership when they don't know the processes and procedures in place for running the organization. It is time to stop being afraid of the light and start showing the nation that we are not afraid to let them see how we UNION.